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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 001219

SIPDIS

NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR JENDAYI FRAZER
LONDON FOR CGURNEY
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SUBJECT: TSVANGIRAI VOWS MASS ACTION; MUGABE WARNS MDC
AGAINST IT

REF: A) HARARE 1151 B) HARARE 1136 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: political section chief Matt Harrington.
Reasons: 1.5 (B) and (D).

Summary

11. (C) The talks between ZANU-PF and the MDC have collapsed for now, as President Mugabe insisted the ruling party would not participate until after the courts rule on the opposition's legal challenge of the presidential election results. MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai subsequently declared that mass action is now unavoidable and inevitable since the population is "combative and defiant" and refused to recognize Mugabe's legitimacy. The objective of mass action would be to make the country ungovernable and force a new election, but an MDC advisor said the party needed at least six more months to lay sufficient groundwork for such an effort to be successful. An independent political analyst thought that the MDC would not be able to sustain effective mass action and should concentrate instead on strengthening its own structures, devising appealing policy alternatives, and intensifying efforts to build bridges to the continent, particularly to South Africa. Taking these steps, while letting food shortages and economic decline take their inevitable toll on the current government, might be the best of Tsvangirai's narrowing options. End Summary.

Interparty talks collapse

12. (C) After several days of energetic attempts by the South African and Nigerian facilitators to jump start the nascent dialogue between ZANU-PF and the MDC, it appears that the talks have collapsed before they ever really began. As reported in reftels, the ruling party requested a suspension of the dialogue (which had, to date, produced only an agreement on agenda items) until the MDC's legal challenge of the election results was completed, and President Mugabe refused to budge from this position in a subsequent discussion with the facilitators. We understand that MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai plans to phone Nigerian President Obasanjo, presumably to follow up on the latter's promise to travel to Harare personally to ensure continuation of the dialogue.

13. (C) Prominent political analyst (and occasional advisor to the MDC leadership) Brian Raftopoulos told us that the MDC needs the talks more than the ruling party. The dialogue gives the MDC visibility, and the longer the opposition party is out of the public spotlight, the more they lose credibility and relevance.

Mass action "inevitable"

14. (C) In a May 18 interview with an independent weekly newspaper, MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai said mass action now appears to be the only feasible alternative left for the opposition party. "We have come to a stage where non-violent action has to be taken. It is evident that mass action is unavoidable. It is now inevitable." He reiterated some of the points that he made with us on May 14 (reftel), namely that the party has engaged in nationwide consultations on the way forward, and that the mood around the country is "combative and defiant." He implied that, ultimately, the achievement of peaceful change depends upon Zimbabweans themselves, not on the international community. Throwing down the rhetorical gauntlet, Tsvangirai insisted that "The people are refusing to accept Mugabe as their president and as a responsible leadership we are going to channel their emotions in a positive way that will resolve the crisis this country is in."

15. (C) Gandhi Mudzingwa, Tsvangirai's special advisor, told us on May 21 that the objective of mass action would be to make the country ungovernable, and create an imperative for an election rerun by forcing Mugabe from office. Sufficient groundwork, however, has not yet been laid for mass action to

be successful, according to Mudzingwa. Although the party had completed consultations with its own structures around the country, it had only just begun to confer with broad-based civic organizations -- such as the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and the Zimbabwe National Students Association -- whose participation would be critical to the success of such an endeavor. In addition, the MDC must also concentrate on demoralizing members of the armed forces, reducing their inclination to fire on protestors, a factor which will depend in large measure on the passage of time, as the economy continues to deteriorate and affects soldiers and their families. Mudzingwa estimated that the party would not be ready to launch mass action for at least six months. Asked whether Tsvangirai agreed with that assessment or was inclined to act much sooner, Mudzingwa said it was unclear, and that the MDC leader is under tremendous pressure to act. In a separate conversation, MDC Member of Parliament David Coltart told us some form of limited mass action was necessary, as it would send a signal to the region and international community of continuing unhappiness with the election outcome. He thought the party could and should shut down the country for two days, but that anything longer than that would be unsustainable and would simply play into Mugabe's hands.

16. (C) Raftopoulos maintained that the MDC currently does not have the muscle to mount effective mass action. The ruling party, he said, has succeeded in neutralizing influential civic groups that are key to a successful mobilization effort and has the MDC and its leadership very much on the ropes. An attempt to organize a broad-based and sustained anti-government campaign would, therefore, almost certainly fail, and lead the GOZ to engage in a no-holds barred effort to crush the opposition leadership. Raftopoulos thought Tsvangirai might go for broke, anyway, since he is under enormous pressure to channel the anger of his supporters and demonstrate the party's capacity to deliver, but the consequences of failure are very high. In order to avoid erosion of its influence and bargaining power, Raftopoulos believes the MDC must concentrate on strengthening its organizational structures, regularly devise dynamic policy positions, particularly on land, maintain its international stature as a credible alternative to ZANU-PF, and intensify efforts to build political bridges on the continent, particularly with South Africa.

Mugabe to "deal with" the MDC

17. (U) Meanwhile, President Mugabe's remarks on May 15 to a national gathering of ZANU-PF youth made clear that the MDC must tread very carefully. Using the truculent language typical of his rantings against his political opposition, Mugabe said his government would not tolerate further "nonsense and rubbish" from the MDC. He warned that "if they choose violence, then we will deal with them effectively," and described the organization of mass action as a "dangerous undertaking" that would not be tolerated. The President once again cautioned Zimbabweans against allowing the assumption of power by a party he claimed is funded and manipulated by the British.

Comment

18. (C) Morgan Tsvangirai's latitude for maneuver is narrowing. He faces on one side large numbers of disgruntled supporters who are fed up with ZANU-PF's economic mismanagement and lawlessness and are leaning heavily on the MDC to do something to extricate them from increasing misery. Failure in the near term to demonstrate that the party is a force to be reckoned with could relegate it to irrelevance. At the same time, President Mugabe knows that large-scale demonstrations could quickly get out of hand and lead to consequences he cannot control. We have no doubt, therefore, that he will use all necessary force to crush demonstrations even before they begin. Under these circumstances, we doubt there is a critical mass of people willing to risk their necks without some realistic possibility it would lead to positive change, an outcome which Tsvangirai cannot guarantee.

19. (C) The MDC leader thus finds himself in a box with few good policy options. His best course of action may be simply to bide his time, focusing on strengthening his party organizationally and staying in the public spotlight by holding regular rallies and proposing appealing, realistic policy alternatives to those being pursued by ZANU-PF. In the meantime, worsening food shortages and continued economic deterioration will generate their own pressures on the current regime, making Mugabe's position domestically and in the region increasingly untenable.

SULLIVAN